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ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to combat the persistent problem of adult illiteracy, the Center for Advancing Technology was initiated at Piedmont Community College (PCC) in North Carolina and charged with the design of an effective model of rural, adult education for use throughout the state. The first step in the development of the center's literacy program was a national conference on adult education, at which educational leaders compiled a list of basic assumptions about illiteracy. These assumptions included the following: (1) on a yearly basis, the number of adults seeking high school equivalency diplomas is less than the number of dropouts; (2) the dropout rate is not decreasing significantly; (3) most illiterates spend more energy concealing their shortcoming than it would take to overcome it; and (4) most illiterates want to be able to read, write and perform mathematical computations. Participants also considered ways to alleviate the problem, including implementing new and stimulating instructional methods, providing transportation to class sites, making child care available at class sites, and making class schedules convenient for potential students. Having defined the scope of their adult literacy program, the center then divided its implementation into management and instruction segments. A management team gathered the best and most versatile courseware, including hardware and software, to use in an adult computer lab at PCC. The lab provided orientation, instruction, drilling, tests, and learning styles surveys and allowed students to receive immediate and non-judgemental feedback. While the management team was developing the lab, recruiting/instruction teams were formed, consisting of teachers to integrate regular and computer sessions, recruiters/drivers, and child care personnel. For the 11 weeks of the program, two 3-hour classes were held at PCC and two local elementary schools. Based on such evidence as a 67% retention rate at the PCC site, the program was considered a success by the center, which is proposing to continue and expand its efforts. (VVC)

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THE CENTER FOR ADVANCING TECHNOLOGY SUCCEEDS WITH NEW LITERACY PROGRAM

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JC 890 450

The Center for Advancing Technology succeeds with new literacy program

By Charles Bailey
and William D. Rentz

That adult illiteracy is a negative force affecting tens of millions of Americans is nothing new. For years educators have been grappling with the issue. Most of the efforts have been failures - the proof being that the problem still exists - for various reasons.

Often overlooked in adult literacy programs are the things that prevent adults from enrolling in basic education programs. However, the Center for Advancing Technology at Piedmont Community College in Yanceyville, NC focused on this in its recently completed adult literacy classes.

Funded by a special allocation from the NC Department of Community Colleges in 1988, the Center was given, among other projects, the mission of developing innovative ways to combat adult illiteracy.

The Center, located in rural, sparsely-populated Caswell County, was to design a model for rural adult education throughout the state based upon its local work.

The Center's literacy program was founded upon the premise that classes for adults must have a more positive environment than the classes that alienated them when they were schoolchildren. In addition, learning obstacles unique to adults had to be confronted.

As a first step, the Center held the National Conference on Rural Education in Yanceyville on November 30, 1988. Leaders in education, government, business and the community discussed adult literacy and related topics.

A list of basic assumptions about the local illiteracy problem was developed during the conference:

- Approximately 38% of the local population has not earned a high school diploma or its equivalent (this is roughly the same as the national percentage);
- The drop-out rate is not decreasing significantly;
- On a yearly basis, the number of adults seeking high school equivalency diplomas is less than the number of drop-outs;
- Illiterates tend to stay illiterate and develop patterns that prevent them from becoming literate;
- Most illiterates spend more energy concealing the shortcoming than it takes to overcome it;
- Tangible rewards for literacy training must be immediately obvious because most illiterates cannot see a reason to change;
- Most illiterates will not commit themselves to long-term goals;
- Most illiterates want to be able to read, write and perform mathematical computations;
- Most high school graduates are "technical illiterates" because of rapidly occurring dramatic changes in and impacts of technology.

A second list of directives designed to alleviate barriers to literacy was compiled:

- New and stimulating instructional methods must be implemented;
- Transportation to class sites must be provided;
- Child care at class sites must be made available for parents and others with responsibility for children;
- Class schedules must be convenient for potential students;
- Determined and comprehensive recruiting must be done;
- Recruiters must stay involved with recruits and accept responsibility for their class attendance and progress;
- Literacy teams of coordinators, instructors, recruiters, drivers and child care personnel must be created and cash incentives predicated on class progress offered.

Having defined the scope of the adult literacy project, the Center then divided its implementation into two segments; management and instruction.

The management team worked with Piedmont Community College's regular literacy staff, the NC Departments of Community Colleges and Public Instruction, and other groups and organizations. With this help, the team began by researching computer-aided literacy programs in the state.

After gathering extensive information on these programs, the management team selected the best and most versatile courseware, including hardware and software, to use in an adult literacy computer lab at PCC.

In order to achieve the Center's adult literacy goals, the lab had

to effectively reach students with grade levels from zero to 12. The programs had to be capable of several instructional functions, including:

- Orientation;
- Instruction;
- Drilling and practice;
- Fun and games;
- Quizzes and tests;
- Voice programming; and
- Learning styles surveys.

A lab with these capabilities allows students to receive immediate, non-judgemental feedback. Instructors benefit from the computers' capacity to monitor, evaluate and plan student work and progress. Some programs even call for the student, teacher and computer to work together.

While the management team was developing the lab, recruiting/instruction teams were formed. It was decided that one Center class would be held at each of three sites in Caswell County. One team was assigned to each locale, with a supervisor overseeing the entire county.

Instructors were given 21 hours to become familiar with the lab courseware. It was considered essential that they have confidence in both the computers' abilities and their skill with the courseware. They achieved that and also became proficient at integrating regular and computer sessions.

In addition to instructors, these teams were comprised of two

recruiters/drivers and child care personnel, if needed. Recruiters also served as teacher aides, accompanied students in classes and helped to keep attendance and progress at high levels in other ways.

Incentives were arranged on a two-level plan. Retention rates between 50% and 65%, and an average progress between .25 and .49 grade levels earned each team member a 20% cash bonus. Retention above 65% and progress over .50 grades won teams a 40% bonus above salary.

Classes were held at PCC's campus in Yanceyville, the seat of Caswell County, and at two outlying elementary schools. The campus class had ready access to the lab and the classes at the schools were transported to the labs once each week.

Two three-hour classes were held every week at varying times at each site for 11 weeks. There was a total of 66 hours of literacy instruction for each class.

The program was considered a success by the Center.

Computer acceptance by the students, who ranged in age from 20 to 90 years, was excellent. Attendance on days when students had lab sessions was higher than for other sessions, according to the instructors.

Two of the three county literacy teams earned 20% bonuses. The highest retention rate, 67%, among the teams was at the college campus class. An outlying class site registered the best grade

progress, .52 grades. None of the teams achieved figures earning it a 40% bonus.

Measurement of the success of literacy programs is difficult and not always accurate. Below are observations from a Center staff member, Charles Bailey, that suggest progress on a more subjective scale than statistics.

"I watch an 82-year-old woman, who could not read her name or write her address, read elementary Bible stories and write her name and address after just five weeks. I would still concede that she is functionally illiterate, but her smile is a sight we all need to see!

"And I watch a young lady work with fractions and decimals that were long lost or never learned, and I see the belief in her eyes.

"It is success to see the smile or feel a tug on your sleeve by a man somewhere around 75 years old, who says, 'Thank you, this is the best thing that ever happened in my life.'"

Following the successful first-year pilot program, the Center is proposing to continue its innovative literacy instruction and recruiting methods and to expand its adult literacy computer lab.

Ideally, the Center would like to have a lab open 24 hours a day, 6-7 days per week so that scheduling will be no obstacle to literacy training. Students will be able to study in a self-paced, low-stress environment with supervision and tutoring provided at all times.

This lab will help reduce illiteracy in the area immediately. It will also allow the Center to maintain its experiments with the newest and best courseware and instructional methods and thus strengthen the assault in Caswell County and elsewhere - on illiteracy.

Dr. Rentz was Director of the Center for Advancing Technology at Piedmont Community College in Roxboro and Yanceyville, North Carolina. Mr. Bailey was a Special Assistant to the Center. For more information, contact Dr. Rentz at Piedmont Community College; PO Drawer T; Yanceyville, NC 27379; (919) 694-5717.

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